



Gender Neutral Pronouns

By Michael Quinion

Can one avoid sexist writing?

As English has no gender-neutral pronoun in the singular (*its* can only be used of objects, not of people) writers are faced with a knotty problem when they want to speak of one person, but either don't want to identify that person by sex, or don't know what it is. This is a matter of increasing importance as writers and their readers are becoming more sensitive to the sexist implications of such language. Various solutions are possible:

- *Use the male pronoun as the gender-neutral pronoun* (*Your child should always be comforted when he cries*). This is the traditional solution and the one still advocated in many style books. However, it is increasingly being seen as unacceptable.
- *Use both pronouns together*, such as *he or she* or *he/she* (*Ask the first shop assistant you find whether he or she can tell you the price*). Though this may be unexceptionable enough from the point of view of gender, it's a messy and ungainly solution stylistically, and one to be avoided.
- *Use another pronoun instead*, in particular *they/their* (*if that spectator keeps waving their arms about, someone is going to get hurt*). Grammarians and careful users dislike seeing this usage in print, though it is increasingly common in speech and informal usage and may even become the standard form one day. Unfortunately, it hasn't reached that stage yet and there are many situations in which it is unacceptable, despite historical precedents *Invent a new pronoun*. This would be the ideal solution, but pronouns are part of the deepest core of our vocabulary and it has been a very long time indeed since a new one has come into the language. However, over the years a large number of such suggestions have been put forward, though the only ones seen at all frequently are *sie* and *hir*. There are great barriers to using them, especially unfamiliarity and the lack of any consensus about which to use. But if enough writers turn to them, they could become mainstream terms in short order.
- *Alternate male and female forms*. Avoid this within one text, as it leads only to confusion on the part of the reader.
- *Use the female pronoun instead*. Writers do use *she* as a conscious alternative relatively frequently. However, it is as open to the arguments about inherent sexism as continuing

to use *he* for the generic form.

- *Rephrase the sentence to avoid the need for a pronoun.* So instead of *The customer went in search of a mechanic to ask him for advice* one could say *The customer went in search of a mechanic to ask for advice*. This often works, but if you are writing in the active mood, the changes to the passive for the circumlocutions can be irksome.
- *Avoid the pronoun by repeating the noun it replaces.* This is sometimes practicable but, after all, the main reason for using pronouns is to avoid such repetition and you are then presented with a different problem. In moderation, however, and in combination with other methods, it can help; see the first sentence of this section, for example, where I have used *one person ... that person*.
- *Use the plural.* Again, I did this in the first sentence above when speaking about writers. This avoided having to say *The writer is faced with a knotty problem when he/she wants to ...* . When the context permits, this is the simplest way out of the difficulty.

As you can see, there is no perfect solution. The best options seem to be to use the plural pronouns *them* and *their* in casual or informal writing and rewrite your text to avoid the problem in more formal writing.

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